

THE DISCOVERY AND EXPLORATION OF THE PELLY (YUKON) RIVER.

(Contributed by the Discoverer.)

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[The Yukon (Pelly) is the largest river that flows from the American continent into the Pacific Ocean. Rising as the "Pelly" River in the Rocky Mountains, on the northern frontier of British Columbia, it maintains a westerly direction for several hundred miles. It crosses the 141st meridian, which forms the eastern boundary of Alaska, and holding a north-west course for more than six hundred miles, it is joined by the Porcupine River from the north. At the junction stands the Hudson Bay Company's station, Fort Yukon. Up to this point the river is called the Pelly, but for the remaining twelve hundred miles of its course it is known as the Yukon. It enters the Sea of Kamchatka (Behring Sea) by several mouths, and the name of one of these mouths, the Kwich-pak (pr. *Kwif-pak*), has by the Russians been misapplied to the whole river. The total course of this magnificent river is estimated at more than two thousand five hundred miles; at six hundred miles from the mouth it exceeds a mile in width, and it is navigable at high water to within a short distance of its very source. In 1838, Malakoff, a Russian official, entered the Yukon and explored it for about six hundred miles—to its junction with the Nulato; four years later, Derabin founded a settlement at this spot. Early in the winter of 1843 Zagoskin, of the Russian imperial navy, arrived on the scene, assisted in building Fort Nulato, and made a report of progress, which has been translated into German. Zagoskin's chart of the Yukon shows only seven hundred miles of its course from the mouth. Here Russian exploration terminated. In 1840, as he himself relates below, Mr. Robert Campbell, an officer of the Hudson Bay Company, while searching for the source of the Colville River, discovered the watershed of a river which he named the "Pelly," and which in 1850, by an exploration of twelve hundred miles, he proved to be identical with the Yukon.]

The following valuable monograph has been with great kindness prepared by the explorer himself expressly for this Reader, and it has been edited from his autograph draft. The connected narrative of these discoveries is now for the first time published, though since 1853 we have enjoyed the fruits of Mr. Campbell's explorations in the maps of British Columbia and Alaska which were prepared by the late Mr. Arrowsmith from Mr. Campbell's journals of exploration.

Early in the spring of 1838 Mr. Campbell, after encountering dangers that had baffled previous explorers, succeeded in establishing a Hudson Bay post at Dease's Lake, the source of one of the west tributaries of the Mackenzie River. In July of the same year he discovered the watershed of the Stikkeen River. Since the discovery of the wonderful Cassiar gold-fields in 1873, Stikkeen River and Dease Lake have become familiar names: the river is the great gateway to the north gold-field of British Columbia, and Lake Dease has been the centre of much feverish life and activity. The remainder of 1838 and the year 1839 were spent by Mr. Campbell either in perilous explorations or in making preparations for them. The explorer was on one occasion reduced to such dire straits that he and his companions were forced to use for food the parchment windows of their hut, and even the very lacing of their snow-shoes.]

In the spring of 1840 I was appointed to explore the north

branch of the Liard River* to its sources, and to cross the Rocky Mountains and try to find any river flowing westward, especially the head-waters of the Colville, the mouth of which, in the Arctic Ocean, had been recently discovered by Messrs. Dease and Simpson.

In pursuance of these instructions I left Fort Halkett† in May with a canoe and seven men, among them my trusty Indians Lapie and Kizsa, and the interpreter Hoole. After ascending the stream some hundred miles, and far into the mountains, we entered a beautiful lake, which I named Frances Lake, in honor of Lady Simpson.‡ The river thus far is rather serpentine, with a swift current, and flanked on both sides by chains of mountains, which ascend to a higher altitude in the background. The country is well wooded with poplar, spruce, pine, fir, and birch. Game is pretty abundant, especially beaver, on the meat of which, with moose-deer, geese, and ducks, we generally lived. Mountain trout are very fine and abundant, and easily taken with a hook and any bait. About five miles farther on, the lake divides into two branches round "Simpson's Tower." The south, which is the longer branch, extends forty miles. Leaving the canoe and part of the crew near the south-west extremity of this branch, I set out with three Indians and the interpreter. Shouldering our blankets and guns, we ascended the valley of a river which we traced to its source in a lake ten miles long, which, with the river, I named Finlayson's Lake and River. The lake is situated so near the water-shed, that, in high floods, water flows from both ends down both sides of the mountains, feeding the Arctic and Pacific Oceans.

From this point we descended the west slope of the Rocky Mountains, and on the second day from Finlayson's Lake, we had the pleasing satisfaction of seeing from a high bank a splendid river in the distance. I named the bank from which we caught the first glimpse of the river "Pelly Banks," and the river "Pelly River," after our home governor Sir H. Pelly. I may mention, in passing, that Sir George Simpson in a kind letter called them both after me, "Campbell's Banks and River," but in my reply I disclaimed all knowledge of any such

* The chief affluent of the Mackenzie River from the west.—*Editor.*

† Fort Halkett is on the Liard River.—*Editor.*

‡ The wife of Sir George Simpson, who was from 1821 to 1857 the Canadian Governor of the Hudson Bay Company.—*Editor.*

A DOG-TRAIN AMONG THE ROCKIES.



places.* After reaching the actual bank of the river we constructed a raft, on which we embarked, and had the pleasure of drifting down a few miles on its bosom; and at parting, we cast into the stream a sealed tin can, with memoranda of our discovery, the date, etc.

Highly delighted with our success, we retraced our steps to Frances Lake, where we regained the rest of our party, who during our absence had built a house on the point at the forks of the lake and called it "Glenlyon House." Returning, we reached Fort Halkett [on River Liard] about the 10th of September, and forwarded the report of our trip by the party who brought up our outfit.

The Company now resolved to follow up these discoveries, and in pursuance of this plan I was ordered in 1841 to establish a trading-post on Frances Lake so as to be ready for future operations westward. In 1842, birch bark for the building of a large canoe to be used in exploring the Pelly was brought up from Fort de Liard with the outfit, and during the winter was sent over the mountains by dog-sleighs to Pelly Banks, where the necessary buildings were put up, and the canoe was built in the early spring of 1843. Early in June I left Frances Lake with some of the men. We walked over the mountains to the Pelly Banks, and shortly after started down stream in the canoe with the interpreter Hoole, two French Canadians, and three Indians. As we advanced, the river increased in size, and the scenery formed a succession of picturesque landscapes. About twenty-five miles from Pelly Banks we encountered a bad rapid,—"Hoole's"—where we were forced to disembark everything. Elsewhere we had a nice flowing current. Ranges of mountains flanked us on both sides: on the right hand the mountains were generally covered with wood; the left range was more open, with patches of green poplar running up its valleys and *burn-sides*, reminding one of the green brae-face of the Highland glens. Moose-deer and bears were often seen as we passed along; and at points where the precipice rose abrupt from the water's edge, the wild sheep,—“big horn,”—were often seen on the shelving rocks. They are very keen-sighted. Once they take alarm, they file swiftly and gracefully over the mountain.

* With characteristic self-forgetfulness the explorer's own name does not once appear over the wide area of his discoveries; but Mr. Whymper (*Travel and Adventure in the Territory of Alaska*) tells us that "Fort Selkirk" on the Yukon is, locally, always known as "Mr. Campbell's Fort."—*Editor.*

When we chanced to get one, we found it splendid eating—good enough for even an epicure.

Thus we travelled on for several days. We saw only one family of Indians,—“Knife” Indians,—till we reached the junction of the Pelly with a tributary which was named the Lewis. Here we found a large camp of Indians,—the “Wood” Indians. We took them by no ordinary surprise, as they had never seen a white man before, and they looked upon us and everything about us with some awe as well as curious surprise. Two of their chiefs, father and son, were very stout, tall, and good-looking. We smoked the pipe of peace together, and I distributed some presents. They spoke very loud, as do all Indians in their natural state, but they seemed kind and peaceable. When we explained to them as best we could that we were going down stream, they all raised their voices against it. Among other dangers, they indicated that inhabiting the lower river were many tribes of “bad” Indians,—“numerous as the sand,”—“who would not only kill us, but eat us.” We should never return, and friends coming to look after us would unjustly blame them for our murder. All this frightened our men to such a degree that I had reluctantly to consent to our return, which under the circumstances was the only alternative course. I learned afterwards that it would have been madness in us to have made any further advance, unprepared as we were for such an enterprise.

Much depressed, we that afternoon retraced our course up stream; but before doing so, I launched on the river a sealed can containing memoranda of our trip, etc. I was so dejected at the unexpected turn of affairs that I was perfectly heedless of what was passing; but on the third day of our upward progress, I noticed, on both sides of the river, fires burning on the hill-tops far and near. This awoke me to a sense of our situation. I conjectured that, as in Scotland of the olden time, these were *signal-fires*; that they summoned the Indians to surround and intercept us. Thus awakened we made the best use of paddle and “tracking-line” to get up stream and ahead of the Indian signals. On the fourth morning, we came to a party of Indians on the bank of the river opposite from us. They made signs to us to cross over; which we did. They were very hostile,—bows bent and arrows in hand,—and they would not come down from the top of the high bank to the water’s edge to receive us. I sent up a man with pieces of tobacco,—the em-



TRACKING ON PELLY RIVER.

blem of peace,—to reassure them; but at first they would hardly remove their hands from their bows to receive it. We ascended the bank to them, and had a most friendly interview, carried on by words and signs. It required, however, some *finesse* and adroitness to get away from them. Once in the canoe we quickly pushed out and struck down stream and obliquely for the opposite bank, so as to be beyond arrow-flight, and I faced about gun in hand to watch their actions. The river was there too broad for either ball or arrow. We worked hard during the rest of the day and till late. The men were tired out, and I made them all sleep in my tent that night while I kept watch. At that season the night is so clear that one can read, write, or work throughout. Our camp lay on the bank of the river at the base of a steep bank which had large trees here and there up its grassy slope. In the forks of one of these trees I passed the greater part of this anxious night, reading *Hervey's Meditations* and keeping a vigilant look-out. Occasionally I descended and walked to the river-bank, but all was still. Two years afterwards, when friendly relations had been established with the Indians in this district, I learned to my no small astonishment that the hostile tribe encountered down the river had dogged us all day, and when we encamped for the night had encamped behind the crest of the hill; and that from this lair they had watched my every movement. With such exact detail as only Indians can observe, they described me seated in the tree, holding "something white" (the book) in my hands, and often raising my eyes to make a survey of the neighborhood; then, descending to the river-bank, taking my horn-cup from my belt, and even while I drank glancing up and down the river and towards the hill. They confessed that, had I knelt down to drink, they would have rushed upon me and drowned me in the swift current; after thus noiselessly despatching me, they would have massacred the sleeping inmates of my tent. How often, without knowing it, are we protected from danger by the merciful hand of our God! Next morning we were early in motion, and were glad to observe that we had outwitted the Indians and outstripped their signal-fires. After this we travelled more at leisure; we hunted along our advance, and in due time reached Frances Lake.

For a few years after this we confined our operations to trading, etc., between Frances Lake and Pelly Banks; but during the summer we sent hunting-parties down the Pelly to collect

provisions for our establishments; and by this means we obtained accurate information respecting the Pelly River, its resources, Indian tribes, etc.

In the winter of 1847-8, we built boats at Pelly Banks, and, sending off our returns to Fort Simpson, we left Pelly Banks early in June 1848, to establish a post at the forks of Pelly and Lewis Rivers which was named Fort Selkirk. Ever since the discovery of the Pelly River in 1840, various conjectures were hazarded as to what river the Pelly was, and where it entered the sea.

Fort Yukon was, I think, established in 1846 or 1847* from Peel River near the mouth of the Mackenzie. From the first I expressed my belief, in which hardly any one concurred, that the Pelly and the Yukon were identical. In 1850, having obtained Sir George Simpson's permission, I explored the lower river, and by reaching Fort Yukon I proved the correctness of my conjectures.†

From Fort Yukon I directed my boat and party upwards into the Porcupine River. I was accompanied by Mr. Murray, who was coming out with the returns, and whose duty it was to bear back with him the Yukon outfit from La Pierre's House at the head of the Porcupine River, to which point supplies were transported over the mountains in winter by dog-sleighs from Peel River. La Pierre's House duly reached, we left our boat there and walked over the mountains to Peel River, about ninety miles; thence by boat we ascended the Mackenzie River to Fort Simpson. I thus performed a circuit of several thousand miles from my point of departure on the Liard River. Great astonishment was felt by all my friends and acquaintances when they saw me reach Fort Simpson by *coming up the Mackenzie River* instead of descending the Liard, for no one entertained a suspicion that the Pelly River had any connection with the Yukon, or that the Pelly was linked with the Porcupine, Peel, and Mackenzie Rivers. Thenceforward this new route, so unexpectedly found out, was made the highway for the transport of outfits, and result of trade to the Pelly and all intermediate posts.

When I visited England in 1853, this vast stretch of country,

* The original fort was built in 1847. This having been undermined by the river, was replaced in 1867 by a new fort a mile farther down. — *Editor.*

† In this exploration Mr. Campbell must have descended the river twelve hundred miles. — *Editor.*

— until then a blank on the map, and untrodden and unknown of white men,—was, under my direction, correctly delineated on his map of North America by the late J. Arrowsmith, the Hudson Bay Company's hydrographer, and hence it happens that many of these rivers and places of note are named after my friends or after the rivers in my native glens.

The Pelly [Yukon] is a magnificent river, increasing in size by the many affluents that swell its tide. It sweeps in a gentle, serpentine course, round the spurs of the double mountain range that generally skirts each side of the valley.

At a distance of some forty-five miles from Fort Yukon, the mountains recede, the river widens and for miles wanders among countless islands. Of these twin ranges the more distant is much the loftier. Many of its summits are dotted with wreaths of snow, while others wear a perpetual mantle of white. Many of the Pelly's affluents are large streams—especially the McMillan, Lewis, White, and Stewart Rivers. Four kinds of salmon ascend the river in great numbers in their season; and then comes a busy harvest-time for the Indians, who assemble in large camps along the river, and are most expert in the use of the spear. Large numbers of salmon are killed, some for present use, and some for winter use. Salmon have been seen and killed above Pelly Banks, which is more than two thousand miles from the sea. Steamers from the Pacific have already ascended to Fort Yukon (twelve hundred miles); and during the freshet they can ascend more than twelve hundred miles further (to Hoole's Rapid). The lakes all over the country abound in excellent white fish.

The fauna of the country is rather abundant and varied. It includes moose and reindeer; bears, black and grizzly; wolves, wolverines; rats, hares; the fox, lynx, beaver, mink, and marten. I saw the bones, head, and horns of buffaloes; but this animal had become extinct before our visit, as had also some species of elephants, whose remains were seen in various swamps. I forwarded an elephant's thigh-bone to the British Museum, where it may still be seen.

The vegetation of the country is rich and varied. I forwarded several examples of the flora to the late Sir William J. Hooker, Director of the Kew Gardens. I also sent him specimens of all the rocks from Yukon to Pelly Banks. The climate is more pleasant and genial than in the same latitude on the east side of the mountains.



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